

UNDERSTANDING AT-RISK YOUTH AND INTERVENTION  
PROGRAMS THAT HELP THEM SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

By

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this literary review was to research at-risk youth to gain a better understanding of the difficulties and challenges that co-exist with this problem, particularly the increasing numbers of high school dropouts that has reached crisis proportions. The situation requires serious work be done to help combat the dropout problem. The literary review explored and defined what at-risk really means, what impact this problem has on society, the misconceptions associated with the term “at-risk,” and school-wide intervention programs designed to reach students’ at-risk and promote school success. This literary review also addressed the methods schools use to identify students at-risk, strategies to enhance student’s learning experiences at school, and other methods to challenge at-risk students to stay in school.

Making a positive difference in a student’s educational experience can be accomplished by helping them feel as though they belong (Sanders and Sanders, 1998). Effective intervention programs require the collaborative efforts and talents of students,

educators, parents, community members, and business leaders coming together to address and meet the needs of their youth at-risk.

The assumption that youth at-risk are incapable of learning and/or do not care about anything is a fallacy. The truth of the matter is our youth do care and they want and can learn. They long for adults who are willing to make the effort to understand them and who will provide them the acceptance and guidance they need. If one is patient and looks hard and deep enough, they will understand that the at-risk child's message is this - "Don't give up on me."

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Don't give up on me. It is unlikely we will hear these exact words from our troubled youth. In fact, the words they speak and the behaviors they exhibit are paradoxical, cunningly leading us to believe that they don't care about anything. But the truth of the matter is, our youth do care. They not only need caring and concerned adults in their lives, but also long for adults who willingly make the effort to understand them and who believe in them. And, they do want to learn, contrary to what many people believe. According to Conrath (1994), this is the central, however covert, message our troubled youth are sending adults. The primary objective is to help kids build their self-esteem, self-confidences, and an internal sense of responsibility. He tells those individuals when working with troubled youths to always remember "the most important work in the world is going on: learning; gaining self-reliance; participating in the culture" (Conrath, 1994, p. 44). The fruits of our labors may not always be immediate. In fact, according to research, it oftentimes takes years before we see the desired changes in the behaviors and attitudes of our more challenging youth (Blankstein, 1997).

The problem isn't going to disappear any time soon. There is no doubt challenges are a mainstay in our schools. Its customers, our youth, inherently generate insignificant uprisings regularly and will continue to do so while schools are in existence. But there is a deeper, more profound issue lurking within our schools. Shadowing the so-called "well-adjusted student," are the youth falling victim to an extensive range of risk factors that make them a member of a growing population of diverse youths labeled "at-risk." Those risk factors, described Morris (2000, p. 4) "are

low achievement, retention in grade, behavior problems, poor attendance, low socioeconomic status, and attendance at schools with large numbers of poor students.” Youth who have been afflicted with many risk factors will drop out earlier than others (Kronick, 1997). McMillian and Reed (1994) however, have a different perspective on students at-risk. For some students at-risk, it has been their exposure to these same risk factors that helped in their developing the necessary coping skills enabling them to triumph over their adversities. These “resilient” undercover youth are truly survivors in the system.

The trouble associating academic success with the symptoms of “at-risk” is that it seldom, if ever, co-exists. Even though not all students at-risk perform inadequately academically, most do, and it “begins early in their school experiences” (Lundenberg, 1999, n.p.). In such cases, one will triumph over the other, academic success usually suffering defeat.

School intervention programs should be in place for the rebound if they are to keep their students in school. But what will it take? Roderick said:

Reducing dropout rates also requires that we have a base of knowledge of the manner in which a youth’s school experiences and the institutional characteristics of the school he or she attends influences the course of his or her school career (1993, p.17).

Alspaugh (1998) supported the same view that the organizational structure and overall climate of the school can test the resilience of youth at-risk. School organizational characteristics have been found to be associated with higher drop out rates.

According to Bonilla, Kelly and Gaskel (cited in Lunenburg, 1999, n.p.), the at-risk problem with our youth has become a nationwide problem that “has social and economic implications for individuals and for society.” General Colin Powell made the following statement at a Philadelphia convention when George W. Bush was nominated as a candidate for President of the United States. Powell said:

We either get back to the task of building our children the way we know how, or we’re going to keep building jails in America. And it is time to stop building jails in America, and get back to the business of building our children. (Cassel, 2001, p. 422)

President George W. Bush’s goal for education is to leave no child behind. But there are those who are concerned this can only be a dream, because it is not reality. Gussner (2001) wrote that obstacles will continue to prevail for those youth and their families afflicted by the poverty that has governed them over generations.

There has been substantial research done on adjudicated youth focusing on why we need to understand what is happening to our youth. It indicates a need for a comprehensive approach in providing educational and transitional services for these students. The youth’s words are rich with lessons for all to learn. A few examples youth shared in describing their reasons for their struggles included having problems at home, problems with peers, the teachers don’t care about them, they got mixed up with drugs and alcohol, unsatisfactory school performances, and low self-esteem (Pollard, 2001).

This literary review took a closer look at the youth identified as at-risk to see what strides high schools have taken to (1) identify their students at-risk (2) understand



the problems enveloping youth at-risk (3) enhance their student's learning experiences at school, and (4) challenge their students to stay in school. Sanders and Sanders (1998) said one way to keep students in school is to help them feel like they belong and to make school more interesting. But in order for any plan to work will require the combined efforts and talents of students, educators, parents, community members (public and private), and business leaders coming together to address and meet the needs of their youth at-risk.

### Statement of the Problem

The purpose for this literary review is to research at-risk high school students and to identify effective intervention programs that help to promote their success in school. The information gathered for the literature review began during the summer of 2001 and was collected from a variety of resources. The information was studied and analyzed carefully for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of students at-risk, the difficulties and challenges that co-exist with this problem, and the intervention programs that help at-risk students succeed in school.

### Definition of Terms

For clarity of understanding, the following terms need to be defined:

At-Risk: "Include elementary and secondary school students who, on the one hand, run the risk of not acquiring the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to become successful adults and, on the other hand, behave in ways that put them at-risk for not graduating from high school" (Herr, 1989, p. 201).

Drop-Out: A student who leaves a school or college before completing a course of study or before the end of a term (The World Book Dictionary, 1991).

Intervention: According to the Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993, intervention is the traditional and familiar word for school-based efforts to improve clients' lives and change problems (cited in Murphy & Duncan, 1997).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

There has been considerable literary works defining youth at-risk. According to Herr (1989), there is no categorical or concise definition. The definition changes “as legislation purposes change and knowledge about psychological definitions expands” (p. 191). Another topic featured in this chapter includes discussing the risk factors that act as antecedents to at-risk youth. Also investigated are the misconceptions and myths that imprison children who are labeled “at-risk,” and it will take understanding and perhaps even a change in attitude from others to help provide the opportunities necessary for at-risk youth to become successful. Additionally, literature on at-risk populations is oftentimes interfaced with the belief that the problems of at-risk youth are becoming a national dilemma. Successful interventions protecting our youth at-risk are a result of individuals working together. This united front, which stimulates a systems change, consists of the student, family, school, and community whose forces together cultivate positive results. And finally, intervention programs were explored earnestly in an attempt to identify effective strategies and techniques that help to keep all youth in school.

#### The Youth We Label At-Risk

Who are these students labeled at-risk and what does the term really mean? There are a number of definitions that labor to interpret the meaning of at-risk. Herr (1989) suggested, “The challenge for counselor’s now and in the future is the changing definitions of who among the diverse population of the United States is “at-risk” (p. 189). Frymier suggested interpreting at-risk as a process, and to look at youth at-risk as a

product of society. He claimed that individuals are not born at-risk, but instead are made at-risk from the influences of society (Frymier; cited in Husby, 1998).

Morris (2000) reported that the most popular of all definitions of at-risk students are those students who are probably not going to graduate from high school (p. 4).

Slavin, Karweit, and Madden, 1989 (as cited in Morris, 2000) said “The meaning of the term ‘at-risk’ is never very precise, and varies considerably in practice. One possible definition is that students who are at-risk are those who, on the basis of several risk factors, are unlikely to graduate from high school” (p. 1).

The Wisconsin State Legislative, through the 1985 Wisconsin Act 29, created the s. 118.153 Wisconsin Statute that speaks directly to the needs of students. Under the Children At-risk Statute, “‘Children at-risk’ is defined as pupils in grades 5 to 12 who are at-risk of not graduating from high school because they failed the high school graduation examination administered under s. 118.30 (1m) (d), are dropouts, or are 2 or more of the following: One or more years behind their age group in the number of high school credits attained, two or more years behind their age group in basic skill levels, habitual truants, parents, adjudicated delinquents, or eighth grade pupils whose score in each subject area on the examination administered was below the basic level, 8<sup>th</sup> grade pupils who failed the examination administered under s. 118.30 (1m) (am) 1. was below the basic level, 8<sup>th</sup> grade pupils who failed the examination administered under s. 118.30 (1m) (am) 2., and 8<sup>th</sup> grade pupils who failed to be promoted to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade (legis.state.wi.us).”

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) uses the term at-risk to define at-risk children as having been victimized by a number of health, social,

educational, and economic related factors. The Children At-risk initiative marked the beginning for addressing these types of issues putting children at-risk. In 1985, the Wisconsin State Legislature, through 1985 Wisconsin Act 29, created s. 118.153, Wisconsin Statutes, the Children At-risk Statute. This was the first piece of legislation that places the responsibility on school districts to improve the quality of education for all students. The school districts are required to have in place procedures for identifying at-risk students and a comprehensive plan to serve the needs of children at-risk through “curriculum modifications, parental involvement, pupil support services, and education for employment programs” (DPI, 1990, p. 5).

#### Identifying At-Risk Factors

There are a great number of factors that put children at-risk for not succeeding educationally or in life. Most have been touched by adverse circumstances, such as poverty, teen parenthood, homelessness, low self-esteem, drug or alcohol abuse, poor health or nutrition, deficiency in the English language, inadequate opportunities for success in school, loss of hope for the future, and the lack of life goals (DPI, 1990, p. 1)

Also entwined in this mixture of exhaustive factors are the changing family dynamics and its negative influences in the lives of children. Five major factors that have contributed to the extinction of the “traditional family” include divorce and separation, single-parent families, intergenerational interaction, out-of-wedlock births and teen pregnancy, and cohabitation. According to Van Den Heuvel (1990), “This disruption of child-rearing formats has left many parents and children alike baffled by expected roles and responsibilities which guarantee personal success, self-worth, motivation, and perception of adult functional independence” (p. 7). These rapid

changes in the overall family structure have diminished the capacity to cope with the economic, social, and educational needs of children.

Kronick (1997) pointed out that it has been established what works and what doesn't work for at-risk students in schools. The problem, as with most research studies investigating at-risk populations, is that its focus has been on the superficial aspects of the problem rather than the underlying cause of the problem. Generally the case has been that environmental factors are at the core of many problems that contribute to the individual becoming at-risk. According to Kronick, "Such approaches lead to solutions that attempt to fix (that is remediate) the child, not to change the environment" (p. xi). Sometimes described as a quick fix, over time intervention strategies of this nature prove futile because they eventually fail or fade away (Kronick, 1997).

### Resilience in Children

Succeeding against all odds is the meaning behind the term resilience. Despite the odds against them, there are at-risk students, despite their hardships, who have developed the disposition and necessary coping skills to succeed in school. Winfield (1991) submits "They appear to develop stable, healthy personas and are able to recover from or adapt to life's stresses and problems" (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994). Peng et al. 1992; McMillan and Reed 1993 (cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994) identified four factors as it relates to resiliency. They include individual attributes, positive use of time, family, and school.

Resilient students have positive temperaments and see the world from a glass half-full perspective. It's their positive attitudes that allow them to reach out easily to others with feelings reciprocated positively by those they interact with. Locus of control

is also a high predictor of academic achievement. Intrinsic motivation and aspirations are higher in those students who experience academic success. Success is a precursor to higher motivation to succeed, be a self-starter, and take responsibility for the achievements awarded (McMillan & Reed, 1993, cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994). Resilient students set goals for themselves and look toward the future. They do not blame their failures on their life's circumstances, but instead take personal responsibility for their own performance.

Resilient children use their time wisely and productively. They keep busy by getting involved either through extracurricular activities at school, hobbies, participation in church, or other groups or clubs. Involvement increases self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment thus stimulating motivation when one believes they have the ability to succeed (Geary, 1998; Werner, 1984; Coburn and Nelson, 1989; McMillan & Reed, 1993, as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994). "Involvement in "required helpfulness" seems to be a factor in resilient students' experiences" (Werner, 198; Philihier, 1986 cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994, p. 3). This encompasses volunteer work in the community or taking part in a tutoring program. Participation in such activities tends to give the student a sense of purpose in knowing they can help others.

Resilient children seek out and find a person or persons who provide support and who genuinely care about their welfare. This person doesn't necessarily have to be a parent. It can be a grandparent, aunt or uncle, neighbor, who then becomes a positive role model in their life (Werner, 1984; McMillian & Reed, 1994). When it comes to an at-risk student's success, family composition doesn't play as important a role as does good parent-child relationships and supportive attachments. Strong family ties make the

world a better, safer place giving the child a sense that they have some control over their lives.

#### Other Factors Attributing to School Success

School and support are two words that appear synonymous with resilient at-risk students. Teachers who pay attention and take a personal interest in at-risk students are vital elements that attribute to student success (Geary, 1988; Coburn and Nelson, 1989; McMillian & Reed, 1993 as cited in McMillian & Reed, 1994). Qualities of a teacher desired by at-risk students are teachers who care about them, who respect them as a person as well as learner, and who understand and get along with them. They are teachers who listen to them and take them serious, provide encouragement, and laugh with them. Other qualities include their willingness to listen to students before disciplining for inappropriate behavior, fairness in grading and instruction, offering praise and encouragement for successes, holding all students to high expectations, and a willingness to get to know the student (Werner, 1984, as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994).

School personnel are encouraged “to provide classroom activities and classroom environments that stress high academic achievement while also building students’ self-esteem and self-confidence. The classroom environment should facilitate time on-tasks, student interaction, student success, and positive reinforcement for desired classroom behaviors.” Positive experiences in school promotes a sense of belonging, bonding, and encouragement for students (McMillian & Reed, 1994).



### Understanding Children At-Risk: do we need an attitude adjustment?

There is a stigma that encapsulates children labeled “at-risk.” The term itself re-directs attention into believing that “at-risk” children are “problem” children or bad kids. Kronick (1997) talked about the power in language in that “the language we use affects our experiences and thereby recreates our social reality” (p. 119). Responding to the needs of children requires a change in attitude and assumptions that all children can learn, that we know how to teach children at-risk, the teachings must be challenging, and that what we produce means something (CCSSO, 1988 cited in Children At-Risk, 1990).

When attention is drawn to the problems the child is creating instead of appreciating what is right with the child, it becomes difficult to see the strengths and talents of these children, many whose natural gifts go unnoticed in schools. Research has found that students at-risk oftentimes have unique learning styles that waver differently from that of other students. School failures for these children are usually not due to their lack of abilities, but rather neglect on the school for their structured classroom learning policy. “Schools must deal with the reality that different children do learn at different speeds and can handle subjects in varying degrees of depth” (Bennett, W., Finn, C. & Cribb, J., 1999). Schools must accommodate all children and their various learning styles by integrating flexible teaching strategies in their curriculum. Discouraged learners, especially, need to try out a variety of ways to learn and to complete tasks (Conrath, 1994).

The natural tendency seems to focus on what the child did wrong and what needs to be done rather than try to figure out the cause for the problematic behavior (Appelstein, 1998). Some of the terms oftentimes used to describe children at-risk

include unruly, manipulative, troublemaker, lazy, looking for attention, selfish, and liar. Behind the negative behavioral labels is usually a hidden agenda or an underlying reality – the child’s way of sending a message that not all is going well for them. Applestein emphasized that “reacting forcefully to disruptive behavior will often interfere with our ability to get to the heart of the child’s message. Worse yet, such misapplications of power and control will usually prompt more misbehavior” (p. 22).

Individuals who are “at-risk” are often viewed through narrow lenses without looking at the broader context that contribute and preserve the at-risk behaviors. Before any social justice is bestowed on children at-risk, the meaning of at-risk needs to be clarified and reconceptualized (Kronick, 1998). Conrath (1994) concurred that negative labels are destructive in that they lead the child through a laboring school experience where they eventually become discouraged, defeated, and finally, drop out of school. Woolfolk (1995) cautioned that applying a label, such as at-risk, can be harmful because a person is too complex to be described in only one or two words. The label itself misrepresents the person by becoming the focal point implying that this is the most important aspect of the person.

Adults oftentimes respond to children at-risk in harmful and destructive ways. Rejecting or treating an at-risk learner impersonally further instills in the child that they are unworthy or somehow incapable of carrying out the task. Conrath (1994) said this invites the child to avoid any and all responsibility reinforcing the child with a sense that rejection is something externally controlled, so why even try. To a larger extent, rejection contributes to feelings of discouragement and lack of self-confidence. Conrath

(1988) said, “Anonymity breeds avoidance and hostility, two behavior patterns common the students most likely to become drop-outs.” Conrath also said it takes a tough adult to see the root of the problem and proceed simply by refusing to reject and ignore the child, no matter how challenging a task

#### At-Risk Youth: A National Dilemma

Pay now or pay later. Investing time and energy in our children today is a wise maneuver if the intent is to secure a strong, competitive, and industrious economic and cultural future. Sadly, our present school system is failing an exorbitant number of youths with as many as 30% of youths not receiving an adequate education (Barr and Parrett, 1997). The at-risk situation in today’s society is not just a problem, it is a national crisis with 25% of our high school students dropping out of school (Conrath, 1994). In reference to dropout preventions, Conrath said, “We can’t afford not to. Seventy percent of our prison inmates are high school dropouts. It costs taxpayers about 6 times as much yearly to house a prison inmate as it does to educate a child in public school” (p. 3).

Lunenburg (1999) agreed that the dropout problem has gotten out of hand and is at crisis proportions costing the U.S. an estimated \$250 billion annually in lost earnings, taxes, and social services; 52% on welfare or unemployed; 82% make up the prison population; and 85% are juveniles in the court system.

Over one-quarter of students leave school before graduating. After finding out the personal costs associated with dropping out of school, as many as 46% of those individuals return to school to earn a high school diploma or high school equivalency degree, such as a GED. The economic returns of a high school diploma; however, are

higher than that of a GED, which is why staying in high school and graduating is favored over a GED (Roderick, 1993).

The social costs of drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, delinquencies, and school dropouts far outweigh the costs of preventative programs (Kronick, 1997). Catterall (1985, cited in Wells, 1990) said:

The economic burden of dropouts is felt in increased taxes to support welfare programs, fight crime, and maintain special programs, as well as in lost revenue through lack of taxes generated by these former students who may not be working or who may be in lower-paying occupations (p. 2).

No longer can at-risk children be cast aside. The costs involved in supporting dropouts are enormous. Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern (1990) said that as a society we can no longer afford to abandon the growing number of youth who will be responsible for taking on the future which involves supporting a large number of retired individuals in the twenty-first century. Grand Foundation, 1988, p. 1 (cited in Roderick, 1993):

The plight of the “forgotten half,” never easy, has become alarming. This nation may face a future divided not along lines of race or geography, but rather of education. A highly competitive technological economy can offer prosperity to those with advanced skills, while the trend for those with less education is to scramble for unsteady, low paying jobs (p. 14).

The 1980's mark a historical time because it was a time when eyes were opened to the rising numbers of high school dropouts. With dropout numbers climbing, so do the costs to the dropout and to society (Catterall, 1986; Natriello et al., 1991 cited in

Roderick, 1993). This reawakening occurred as a result of three concerns. The first was attention drawn to the possibility that the American education system was failing. Second, the cost of dropping out is rising considerably, and third, that the larger portion of an already shrinking population of youth are of lower socioeconomic standing and those most likely to drop out of school. “Generated concern centered in the business community that the quality of the American labor force is not, and will not be, adequate to meet the increased skill levels necessary to regain American competitiveness” (Roderick, 1993, p. 9).

From a business perspective, the increasing numbers of at-risk youth is troubling because of the critical role youth play in the labor market. Kolberg (1987) said:

If our economy is to grow as it is capable of growing, we must be able to use the talents of virtually all our young people, because the numbers coming into the labor force is declining. Yet the percentage of those young people who are at-risk is increasing (as cited in Kronick, 1997, p. 48).

The at-risk problem not only affects economic issues but it also affects national security. In the military, one in every nine persons is required to serve their country, and in another 10 years, because of the drop in youth population, the military will need one in three persons to preserve its country’s strength. “If current rates of illiteracy, unemployment, illegitimate pregnancies, and drug and alcohol abuse among our youth do no decline, there simply will not be enough qualified young people to go around,” says Kolberg, 1987, p. 97 (cited in Kronick, 1997, p. 49).

Dropout prevention is a cost effective way to strengthen an economy. The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) was an attempt by the business sector to fight the at-

risk issues and its costly toll on society's resources. The JTPA program was developed to provide skill building to youths in hopes that it would enhance their marketable skills, eventually leading the individual to productive employment (Kronick, 1997).

In Boston, both the business and educational leaders came together in a joint effort to reduce the 16% annual dropout rate and improve the employment opportunities for its youth. This pact was called the Boston Compact. Their efforts consisted of job-readiness workshops, after-school work, and summer work. Orr (1987) said this may have strengthened the union between educators and the business sector in the 1980's, but it did nothing to fix the dropout rate, which did not decrease as a result of these efforts.

So what does the future hold for high school dropouts and its impact on society? Presently, grim futures lie ahead for at-risk students who drop out of school before graduating. Current employment and occupation projections see the labor market status of dropouts as continuing to deteriorate (Roderick, 1993). We know one thing for sure, the problem isn't going to vanish into thin air, but perhaps looking at the problem realistically, as well as politically, is the answer. Reducing the expectations that all programs are to be successful, continuing to strategize from a local perspective, and building alliances, and continually promoting new programs will be more affective in meeting the goal in reducing high school dropout rates (Kronick, 1997). Van Den Heuvel (1990) said, "Insuring the success of families and children is the only insurance policy for our economic and cultural future" (p. I). It is everyone's responsibility, particularly the social institutions, that is the key to reducing the influences that place children at-risk.

### Systems Change: Family, School, and Community

The world is continuously undergoing change and transforming itself and the lives of its inhabitants at an alarming rate. “In the natural world, the ability to change is a condition of survival,” stated Reavis et al. (1999, p. 15). As difficult and turbulent as change can be at times, all individuals, organizations, and cultures must embrace change if they are to survive. With the essence of building resiliency in its youth, the authors were saying it was time to pull together, no longer leaving room for fragmented and isolated services. Instead, integrating the resources of family, schools, and communities is what it will take to meet the changing needs of its youth. Reavis et al. (1999, p. 15) added, “The educational or youth service provider either adapts to meet the changing needs of its youth or it becomes ineffective.”

Conrath (1994) supported the notion that community plays an integral part in the raising of its youth, but conveyed his message with a twist. He stated:

Homes that don't monitor school attendance, an economy that no longer needs young people and their work, and a society that accepts poverty and unemployment as “natural” phenomena in an otherwise affluent population are certainly partly to blame for school dropout, but there is much school can do (p. 3).

Several authors, such as James, Hahn, and Hedin, believe that many of the youth today are egotistical and self-absorbed in their own wants and needs that they've become oblivious to the meaning of respecting and caring for others. This type of narcissistic lifestyle rekindles the revival of the whole community service concept. The community can give back to its youth by promoting and supporting community service

programs. The concept helps young people step outside themselves into another world of caring for others and giving back to society. Making a difference in this fashion would benefit the community as much as it would help youth gain a sense of self-worth and a sense of belonging to their community and to society. It is a viable approach that teaches responsibility and moral development, in addition to producing intellectual gains that result from service-type training (James; Hahn; Hedin: cited in Brendtro, Van Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990).

Before change can occur in our school systems, it is important to understand the lives of its students and to accept the diversity of its population within the school system. Cooperation and a desire to involve oneself in a unified building process can be a rewarding experience (Conrath, 1994). Reavis et al. (1999, p. 17) stated, “At each level, one individual’s or group’s passion and clarity of vision can lead others to the vision on their own.”

Barr and Parrett (1997) are also supporters of pulling together a forum of people that include parents, teachers, community leaders, police, city council members, and others to focus in on the problems youth are facing. The collaborative efforts of family, school, and community involvement can help in developing a plan to promote and enhance opportunities for its youth now and in the future. The National Commission of Children stated, “All schools and communities (should) reevaluate the services that they currently offer and design creative multidisciplinary initiatives to help children with serious and multiple needs reach their academic potential” (Lawson & Anderson: cited in Kronick, 1997, p. 317). Many schools have not taken heed to this message because there continues to be high numbers of students at-risk whose needs are not being met.



The schools and communities must work together because the numbers of youths at-risk continues to be high and is both costly to not only the youth but also to society. A group of deans of education, known as the Renaissance Group, conceded that the colleges and universities, too, have not acted coupon the vast changes in society, and they encourage community agencies to work cooperatively with the schools (Kronick, 1997).

The collaborative foundation is that of teacher-student learning, said Kronick (1997). The affects will expand outward to include other teachers as well as parents and families. “What will evolve from this is learning communities where sharing and cooperation and a sense of community evolve (pg. 316).”

Lawson and Anderson concluded that the collaborative efforts necessary to meet the needs of its youth at-risk encompass that of communication, agreements, decision-making, monitoring and evaluation, recognition, trust and leadership (cited in Kronick, 1997).

The well-being of communities are often measured by their school system’s drop out rates, unemployment and crime rates, and by the family incomes within the community. The perception of most educators is to serve the students by educating them. Serving students in this respect is much like serving the community at large (Alspaugh, 1998).

Family structures are deteriorating, and interrelatedness seems a word of the past. According to Appelstein (1998), family and community connectedness is disappearing and with it are the supportive environments we need to sustain ourselves, because we, as human beings, “are not meant to ‘go it alone’ (p. 266). He also commented that the source of many problems is that troubled youth and

their families are at the mercy of our changing society. The support and connectedness longed for seems to have all but vanished. Appelstein added, “Amid this landscape of isolation and the added stress it produces, is it any wonder that more and more kids across all socioeconomic fronts are grappling with behavioral issues” (p. 267). Alienation has devastating impacts on all human beings, which is why it is important to build strong support networks in families and communities. He suggested for everyone to reach out to others giving unconditionally in ways of compassion, sacrifice and generosity.

Morris (2000) talked about establishing a school/community policymaking council “to serve children at-risk and industry leaders with a vested interest in children’s school success” (p. 10). The council itself can be made up of a variety of groups from the community, such as church groups, businesses, technical schools and community colleges, health and social services groups, and the news media sources. Identifying the problems would be the next step and then providing the necessary assistance to meet the needs of the youth at-risk.

#### Preliminaries to Intervention Programs

Today in society where change is constant, the at-risk situation continues to be a diverse and complicated challenge. Beyond the broad understanding of children at-risk, effective school-wide intervention programs are about early identification, a collection of ingenious intervention strategies, and the collaborative efforts of students, parents, the school, and the community. But, perhaps the solutions to the problems are not as complicated as we think. Murphy and Duncan (1997) said that even the smallest change in the perception of a school problem could ripple into larger changes.

School districts should not rely on the national stereotypes when they design their districts at-risk programs. The drop out issue is complex, therefore, every district must evaluate their individual program carefully to determine the extent of its problem, and proceed by tailoring a program designed to meet their needs, and not someone else's needs (Children At-Risk, 1990).

The World Book Dictionary defined interventions as “an intervention or interfering in any affair, so as to affect its course or issue” (Thorndike & Barnhart, 1991, p. 1105). More emphasis, however, should be placed on the contributions of the client and to capitalize on the client's ingenuity and expertise in finding a solution that fits their unique circumstance and style (Murphy & Duncan, 1997). Murphy and Duncan's philosophy on interventions is about two things. First, interventions must be designed to interrupt unsuccessful attempts to solve a problem encouraging parents, students, and school personnel to look at the situation with an open mind. This opens doors to new possibilities in solving the problem. And second, interventions must be right for the student validating their own theory about change and what their desires are to meet their goals. As Murphy and Duncan put it, “Clients are the inventors; we are their assistants” (p. 64).

Murphy and Duncan's philosophy about change is reflected in O'Hanlon's solution-oriented approach. The solution-oriented approach is about helping the client find what they're already doing right and use that information to eliminate any problems they're having (O'Hanlon, 1999). O'Hanlon listed a host of ideas that focus on concrete actions one can take to make changes in their life. These ideas include changing the frequency of the problem pattern, the time, location, and intensity of the problem

pattern, and adding or taking away something from the sequence of events leading up to the problem. O'Hanlon (p. 13) said there are two things to remember to do in order to make changes:

1. Pay attention to repetitive patterns you are caught up in or what others are caught up in with you, and change anything you can about those patterns.
2. Notice what you're doing when things are going better, and do more of that.

Murphy and Duncan (1997) suggested that teachers and other school personnel try to "sing a different song" when it comes to interventions. Instead of the usual intervention, be imaginative and creative because it is the unpredictability that creates a new vision leading to an array of interesting, effective, and fun possibilities in solving problems (p. 68).

"If at first you don't succeed, try something different," said Murphy & Duncan, 1997. It is a good idea for schools to have a stockpile of intervention strategies on hand to draw upon when needed. Interventions can come in all forms from the most simple, uncomplicated style to the more elaborate, sophisticated ways of helping students solve problems. The key is about trying new things if what you're doing isn't working.

### Identifying Students At-Risk

A crucial part of any successful intervention program is in the identification of students who are at-risk. Many schools use a variety of screening devices to identify their students who are at-risk of failing and potentially dropping out of school. They identify their students at-risk by completing an identification assessment or by completing a profile on the student. Questions focus on the risk category/or categories, such as dropout, truant, teen parent, or adjudicated delinquent; achievement categories

identify areas in which the student is one or more years behind in grade level or age group. Other screening forms note characteristics pertaining to academic performance, overall behavior, peer relationships, and other concerns.

Designing effective identification systems specific to an individual school district is a process that involves a number of procedures and examinations of its findings. The more information the better the chances are in detecting the mix of variables that could potentially lead a student to drop out of school. Each piece of evidence is important because even the smallest bit of information can give a clearer view of what's been going on with the student. The process includes gathering information through checklists, student records, surveys, exit interviews, data analysis and its utilization, and finally, the design and implementation of an intervention strategy (Wells, 1990).

The critical task lies in early identification of students at-risk. Slavin et al., 1994 (cited in Kronick, 1997) said, "Early intervention can prevent school failure for nearly every child" (p. 294). Funk et al., 1986; Simner and Barnes, 1991, supported this belief stating "Many dysfunctional behaviors are already evident at kindergarten and become more evident each year, culminating in more serious antisocial behaviors during high school" (Kronick, 1997, p. 290). This is why early identification and intervention is extremely critical in preventing dysfunctional behaviors from developing into a more serious scenario. The Student Assistant Program at a Pennsylvania High School works under this same assumption that early intervention "will lead to the prevention of child and adolescent high-risk, self-destructive behaviors" (Herr, 1989, p. 221). Students at-risk are identified early by using a 105-item checklist called the Behavior Assessment

Form. Areas examined include academic performance, attendance, overall behavior, physical symptoms, illicit activities, extracurricular activities, and crisis indicators, such as victims of abuse or threats, etc.

Principles, teachers, and counselors play very important roles in the early identification process. Many students at-risk should be identified as early as kindergarten and made within the first month of school. Kronick (1997) said that “as a result of identifying at-risk children early and providing each of them with appropriate interventions, the later behavioral crises of drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and dropping out will be greatly reduced” (p. 291). This author purports that some children in the earlier years are less ready to do school and it is because of this it becomes critical they receive extra attention from their teachers and counselor in the form of personal attention, compassion, one-on-one tutoring, home support and assistance. Chances are more likely then that social and academic success that begins in kindergarten through the third grade will extend success in the grades to follow.

There are numerous methods used to detect students that may be at-risk of not being successful in school and potentially dropping out of school. The Los Angeles County Board of Education produced a handbook consisting of three checklists identifying characteristics relating to the school climate, a general checklist describing high-risk students, and an individual student checklist describing non-school, school-related, and family related factors.

Dane County School District in Miami, Florida, developed a profile identifying English proficiency, 18 or more absences per year, reading stanines, the number of schools students attended, and a record of their grades.

Wells (1990) gave another example of a local school district in North Carolina who uses an early identification referral form. The referral form consists of two parts. Section one is “Factual Characteristics” which includes information about attendance, school grade retention, basic skills, subjects failed, and family history. Section two is the “Observable Characteristics” which includes school performance, behavior, study and work habits, participation in extracurricular activities, self-concept, and personal characteristics identifying personal friendships, substances abuse, and physical or mental problems. Staff development is another vital component of its identification process.

In the elementary years, The Devereaux Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale (K-6) is a highly capable and effective scale for teachers to use in early identification of at-risk students. It measures behaviors such as “disrespect or defiance, impatience, classroom disturbance, irrelevant responsive behaviors, and external blaming” (Kronick, p. 291). The number of parents, parent’s education, family income gender and ethnic group are other indicators that help to identify children from kindergarten through the third grade who are good candidates for later delinquent behavior.

According to Barrington and Hendricks, 1989; Simner and Barnes, 1991 (cited in Kronick, 1997), at the middle-school level, teacher’s assessment of the student’s reading, mathematical abilities and/or the number of absences is useful information to identify potential dropouts. Weber, 1988 (cited in Kronick, 1997) said that in order to identify potential at-risk students in subsequent grade levels, there are four variables that help to identify these students. These variables include the number of absences, grade

point, age relative to their peers and if the student repeated grades over, and their reading level.

### Examples of School-Wide Intervention Programs

“Big problems do not always require big solutions” (Murphy & Duncan, 1997, p. 5). According to Brendo, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990), not all programs or techniques are effective if not in the company of one key ingredient, which is the quality of human relationships. “Research shows that the quality of human relationships in schools and youth service programs may be more influential than the specific techniques or interventions employed” (p. 58). Positive relationships between teachers and students cultivate respect and foster a safe and nurturing environment where children thrive both emotionally and educationally. “Research indicates that children who are securely attached to significant adults become more curious, self-directed and empathic. In a real sense, attachment fosters achievement, autonomy and altruism (p. 60).

Hyde Park High School in Boston believes it was their up-close and personal attention that kept one freshman student coming to school. This was part of a city’s adopted pilot program that matched students with street-savvy workers whose job it was to watch over the student and mentor them. The author wrote that it is the one-on-one approach that appeared to reduce the anonymity of being a teenager. The teenager responded saying, “Now that I know more people are watching, I’m starting to get my act together” (Anand Vaishnav, Boston Globe, Apr. 9, 2001).

In the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado, it was the personal contact and academic programming tailored to each student’s needs that seemed to make a



difference in the lives of their children. The special attention is keeping kids in school (Wheeler, Denver Post, Oct. 31, 1999).

Goplerund, 1991 (cited in Kronick, 1997) identified and recommended good intervention program management as utilizing program resources, addressing student needs, having a variety of intervention strategies readily available, flexibility, limiting the red tape, providing personal attention to at-risk students, demonstrating equality among ethnic/racial groups, promote early intervention, the use of mentors, getting parents involved, and knowing that each student is their own person, therefore, the expectations placed on individual students should be harmonious with the needs of that student.

Herr (1989) presented a variety of school wide intervention programs. Many of the programs are multifaceted and targeted directly to various groups of students at-risk. A Truancy Intervention Program (TIP), designed by the Philadelphia Public School system, assists students with high absenteeism rates. The program is composed of weekly group counseling sessions welcoming both students and parents. Self-esteem, communication, decision-making, peer pressure, career exploration and problem solving were topics explored. Individual counseling is also available to students addressing the specific needs of the students, such as reading deficiencies, teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, and other issues. In this program, students are placed in empowering positions as they explore their personal situations. Many are asked to design a plan of action on how to improve their attendance at school.

Herr (1989) discussed another targeted group, the alienated youth. A Pennsylvania High School developed a program designed to help kids develop social

skills by getting them more involved in school functions. Twenty students are served at any one time and receive personal counseling, tutoring, crisis intervention, as well as instruction on problem solving. A Systematic Training for Effective Parenting course called STEP was also available for parents.

When the principal of a Denver High School heard that one of his students was thinking about quitting school, he immediately reacted by having the student and their parents or guardian meet with him. Both the student and parent/guardian were required to sign a "Certificate of Dropping Out." The anti-diploma reads: "The undersigned guardian and student accept full responsibility for the listed student being a high-school dropout. By signing this disclaimer, I realize that I will not have the necessary skills to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Although this has been a successful technique, other programs were also in place for students, such as an after-school Welcome Center that provides students with tutoring services. Intensive counseling, the option to change schedules for students who have conflicts with teachers, and, the opportunity to accumulate credits during other quarters if the student fails an entire quarter were also available options (Curriculum Review, Jan. 97).

Project Bootstrap in Alabama proved a useful intervention strategy where at-risk high school students tutor grade school aged children. It is a win-win situation for both parties. Looked upon highly by the younger students, the high school students felt important, thereby increasing their self-esteem. The younger children also benefited because they received the one-on-one attention from their high school tutors (Curriculum Review, May, 1990).

Wheeler (1999) wrote of a Colorado High School whose drop-out rate decreased from 51 students in 1998 to 23 students in 1999. It seemed credit was mostly due to a shift in power with the school board in 1990 when intervention programs for at-risk students became the focal point and was given full support by its members to do something about the problem. The School Board and a new District Superintendent “were as committed to at-risk students as they were to the cream of the crop.” Team effort and rallying to keep kids in school made this school’s drop-out prevention program a success. The board also took steps in hiring additional staff and assistance for ESL students, and starting up a voluntary program to assist students as needed. Grant money awarded sufficed in funding salaries costs and supplies for aiding at-risk students. From the Fall, 1998 to Spring, 1999, 53% of the programs 43 students passed all their classes. Dedication, persistence, and a passion to helping children succeed was the winning combination in this district that involved the efforts of students, staff, parents, and the community (Denver Post, October 31, 1999).

Sanders and Sanders (1998) reported that teachers play a vital role in the lives of their students. Teachers can enhance the retention of at-risk youth by really getting to know their students and working to earn their trust through consistent, positive intervention, being a positive role model, and teaching interesting and relevant information that helps in keeping the student engaged in the learning process. Teachers must closely monitor academic programs, work at maintaining an open line of communication to students, encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities, and act immediately when the patterns of failure appear. Establishing relationships with parents or guardians also adds to the student’s success in school.

Sanders and Sanders (1998) said a counselor's role is just as vital to the success of at-risk students. It includes the identification of at-risk students and intervening in problems with students. A resource person for many teachers, parents, and students, counselors host conferences, provide personal counseling to groups or to individual students.

Diggs, 1996; Lunenburg & Irby, 1999; McWhirter, 1997; Sprick, Sprick, & Garrison, 1998 (as cited in Lunenburg, 1999) found four creative strategies that helped prevent students from dropping out of school. The strategies include involvement with community-based organizations, case management interventions, a school-within-a-school, and state imposed negative-sanction policies. Community-based organizations collaborate with institutions in the community to assist in the mission in dropout prevention. Lunenburg & Irby, 1999 (cited in Lunenburg, 1999) identified services available to students, such as guidance and counseling services, additional health care, outreach services, alternative educational activities assisting in basic skills instruction and after-school academic and social support programming. Case management intervention involves academic assistance, social services, employment services, and computerized data base resource file that allows for matching individual student's needs with the appropriate community services. A school-within-a-school (SWS) is a locally funded program offering services with instruction in basic skills, career exploration, and counseling services. This involves the collaborative efforts of teachers working together on academic disciplines, curriculum, budget, policies and procedures, such as in-house discipline, and enrichment activities (Lunenburg, 1995; Lunenburg & Ornstein, in press as cited in Lunenburg, 1999). Negative sanction policies were established by different

states that invoke sanctions on students for dropping out of school. A Wisconsin family's welfare was reduced because the child failed to attend school on a regular basis (Toby & Armor, 1992, cited in Lundenburg, 1999). In West Virginia there is a "no school, no drive" law. Laws that require good school attendance for new licensees and revoking licenses of dropouts under the age of 18 is becoming is gaining attention across the nation. The intentions are to decrease the drop out rate with hopes to "eliminate some of the social and economic problems associated with high school dropouts" (Lundenburg, 1999).

McGill-Franzen and Allington, 1993; Shepard and Smith, 1989 (as cited in Kronick, 1997), said holding a child back by repeating another year in the same class either to mature or to benefit academically can have negative affects on the child. It reduces the child's self-esteem, they become older than their peer groups, and it sets the stage for eventually dropping out of school. Family support services, tutoring, hands-on activities, and computer-generated learning are ways to enhance learning and reduce the chances of the student not graduating from high school.

Kronick (1997) recommended developing relationships with the student's family and maintaining communications with them at all school levels. "A strong link exists between parents' involvement in the school and their students' success" (p. 295). Offering parenting workshops and assisting parents in need of literacy and job readiness skills is a good policy to follow because, "Children whose parents are learning are more eager to learn" (p. 295). Kronick acknowledged the need to provide substantial services at grades K-5 encouraging lower teacher/student ratios, full-time counselors and human service workers, after-school daycare and services for latch-key children, and health care

services available to all students. Kronick saw the need to promote real-life learning emphasizing “thinking rather than rote memorization” (p. 296).

Bridging the gap between all race and ethnic groups by accepting and embracing student differences is crucial in creating equality in the classrooms. At-risk students need to know someone cares about them. Kronick (1997) suggested when students are absent from school, the school call the parent and child to let them know their attendance is important, and to remind them of the school’s attendance policy.

Effective intervention also means promoting skill development because of the positive affects it has on a child’s self-esteem, decision-making abilities, peer relationships, and academic achievement. Teachers help create cooperative work environments in their classrooms by teaching and implementing new learning activities that are attractive and relevant and that targets their student’s individual learning styles (Kronick, 1997).

Tours for students and parents, the buddy system, and monthly orientation activities are other ways Kronick said would help transition students into schools and act as an intervention strategy in keeping kids feeling connected to their school. Teaching job seeking and job keeping skills help at-risk students explore the world of opportunities and help them set personal goals for themselves, thus improving school attendance, said Miller and Imel, 1987 (as cited in Kronick, 1997). Flexible programs that include part time work are also valuable ways to help at-risk students stay on track rather than drop out of school.

Kronick (1997) suggested offering leaves of absences to students experiencing difficult circumstances beyond their control, and/or provide them with information about

independent course study work. He also suggested providing nutrition and health services for at-risk students and families as needed.

Alternative schools are another viable intervention approach that challenges the demise of at-risk youth. This means offering a variety of educational programs that meet the widely differing needs of individual students. For example, if a student were behind in reading, the alternative school would focus its attention on providing extra help in reading; a teen parent would be provided the necessary health care and pre-natal services along with child care and parenting classes (Barr & Parrett (1997). Alternative schools also help students develop skills in social functioning and behavior competencies (Franklin, 1992). Alternative schools continue to grow because they work. “Alternative schools have grown in number and respect because they have continued to demonstrate effectiveness, often with the most challenging students,” said Barr & Parrett (1997, p. 9). Alternative schools can take on different forms, such as a school-within-a-school format, or as an entity by itself as in a charter school.

The threads that tie alternative schools together are its “smaller settings, positive climate, choice of participation, shared vision, focused curricula, program innovation, and high levels of student engagement, membership, and autonomy” (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989, cited in Barr & Parrett, 1997, p. 14). Trickett et al. (1985) added to this list supportive environment, family and community participation, well-defined standards and rules, accountability, and on-going evaluation (cited in Franklin, 1992). At the core of successful alternative programs is usually a strong visionary principal or leader whose job it is to maintain continuity in programming and organization flexibility (Franklin et al; 1991; Hahn et al; 1987; Hamilton, 1981).

Interventions are ways to help students be successful during their school career. Early identification and interventions, along with school reform and a team approach, is the key in promoting school success in students. Kronick (1997) said:

Problems begin in the home. Children who come to school healthy, who have bonded with their family, who have participated in early childhood programs, and have had parents read to them are ready to learn and bond with the school. Children who do not have this school readiness and/or who exhibit unacceptable behavior need early assistance and early school success if the school's goals of eventual graduation are to occur (p. 298-299).



## CHAPTER THREE

### Analysis of Literature

This chapter serves to examine the research done on youth at-risk and high school intervention programs that help keep our youth in school.

The researcher of this project found that common sentiments shared by the authors in this literary review were that of compassion, sensitivity, and acceptance for youth at-risk for not completing high school. Studies showed that misconceptions and myths will forever present themselves concerning at-risk youth, and it would take a greater understanding and change in attitude before real work could begin. Conrath's (1994) work is heartfelt for youth at-risk. His petition to those who work with at-risk learners is to look carefully to see what's really behind the behavior. His message is to remain adamant in the cause and never give up on students no matter how challenging a task it may be for them. Conrath relays to his readers that children want and need caring adults in their lives and they do want to learn, even though their behavior might reveal otherwise.

This researcher also discovered from the literary review that youth at-risk can be a habitual truant, adjudicated delinquent, teen parent, the homeless and poverty stricken, those in poor health, youth deficient in skills and low in self-esteem, victims of substance, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, or simply youth who have no hope for the future. The literature revealed that becoming "at-risk" is oftentimes the by-product of the change in family dynamics. The traditional family appears to be vanishing and is being replaced by single-parent family structures. Van Den Heuvel (1990) pointed out

in his research that along with the changing family comes confusion in one's role and responsibility in the family.

The literature indicated there is a stigma associated with children labeled at-risk. With this stigma are misconceptions that infer children at-risk as troubled children who can not learn (Conrath, 1994). Such close mindedness negates what is real, and that is all children want and can learn. Every child has their individual talents and gifts to offer society, many of which go unnoticed or spurned in schools. Research has shown that children at-risk have unique abilities, and all would profit if schools would accommodate the needs of all children. Failure is not a chosen goal of at-risk youth. They just need help in breaking the pattern (Conrath, 1988). The negative stigma that reinforces at-risk behaviors is deep rooted and will continue to fester until individuals who are at-risk are seen for their uniqueness and giftedness (Kronick, 1998). Until these changes take place, youth labeled at-risk will be worn down until defeat seems the only option. The child becomes discouraged, defeated, and finally, drops out of school (Conrath, 1994).

But not all is gloom and doom for youth at-risk. Much research has been done on resiliency in children. With their positive temperaments, at-risk youth are able to reach out to others. Their interpersonal abilities are strong because they exercise those abilities on a consistent basis throughout their life. It is much like building from a sturdy foundation. It begins with the development of a healthy self-concept that stimulates motivation leading to achievement and further aspirations. Resilient children keep themselves busy setting personal goals and planning for the future. Research also has shown that resilient children tend to have positive role models in their lives

providing support and guidance, and who genuinely care about them (Werner, 1984; also McMillan & Reed, 1994).

At-risk youth who have teachers exhibiting a caring attitude and respect for all students do much better in school. They are teachers who have been characterized by their willingness to listen attentively, provide encouragement, holding their students to high expectations, and simply enjoying the company of their students (Werner, 1984, as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994). Conrath (1988) purported that youth at-risk use the “I don’t care attitude” for self-protection. Effective teachers can counteract this attitude, first, by refusing such an attitude in their classroom, and secondly, by letting their students know they take their business of teaching and learning very serious. These teachers use flexibility in their approaches toward teaching.

Research conducted by Lundenburg (1999) indicated the drop out problem to be at a crisis level. The figures are becoming astronomical. Lundenburg said that in the U.S. alone, an estimated \$250 billion is lost annually in earnings, taxes, and social services; 52% on welfare or the unemployed; 82% make up the prison population, and 85% are juveniles in the court system. In the literature review, others concurred with Lundenburg saying that the present school system is failing many of its youths (Barr and Parrett, 1997). Conrath (1994) pointed out that 70% of prison inmates are high school drop outs, and no longer can society afford to ignore this problem any longer. Kronick (1997) stressed that the costs of implementing preventative programs are far less than the social costs of drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, delinquencies, and school dropouts. Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern (1990) looked at the problem from another viewpoint. They, too, are proponents of investing time and money into doing whatever

it takes to protect the needs of the growing number of youth who will carry the weight of the future on their shoulders supporting a large number of retired individuals in the twenty-first century. This author believed that Kolberg (1987) had an interesting perspective on the youth at-risk youth dilemma. He pointed out the critical role at-risk youth play in the labor market. The talents found in all young people are critical to the well-being of our economy if it is to grow and flourish. But the numbers coming into the labor force are declining and the numbers of at-risk youth is increasing. The literary review also discovered that not only is the at-risk problem a drain on society economically, but the at-risk problem also affects national security. If illiteracy, unemployment, illegitimate pregnancies, and drug and alcohol abuse numbers do not decline, there will not be enough qualified people to go around preserving the strength and well-being of this country (Kolberg, 1987).

Characteristics found in this literary review that were common in meeting the needs of its youth is the notion that family, school, and community all play an instrumental part in raising its youth. It will take integrating the resources of family, schools, and communities to meet the changing needs of its youth that will help instill in them a sense of belonging and gain them self-worth. (Reavis et al. (1999). It is a worthwhile, simple process for communities to venture into, and can easily be accomplished through promoting and supporting community service projects. The theory is that making a difference teaches responsibility, fosters moral development, and produces intellectual gains that come as a result of taking part in service-type work (James; Hahn; Hedin: cited in Brendtro, Van Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). The literary review further substantiated that an investment in at-risk youth is advantageous

to a community because the well-being of a community is often measured by their school's drop out numbers, unemployment and crime rates, and family incomes within the community (Alspaugh, 1998). The literary review discovered that other researchers supported and extended the collaborative efforts for youth to include other teachers, as well as parents and families (Kronick, 1997).

Applestein, 1998, believes support and connectedness among individuals is even more important in our society today where change is a constant. Alienation can have devastating impacts on human beings, which is why the network of families and communities are so important and essential in life.

The at-risk situation will continue to challenge the mainstream. As extraordinary as the problem may seem, the solutions may not be as complicated as we think. National stereotypes should be avoided, and school districts should assess and rely on their own judgments after a careful evaluation of their district's unique circumstances and needs (Murphy & Duncan, 1997). Some researchers found it necessary to have an open mind in approaching problems and suggested searching out new ideas if the old ways are no longer working. It is also important to remain cognizant that every student is different; therefore, what works for one may not work for another. What research findings have suggested is that school districts have an assortment of intervention strategies to select from for the mishmash of situations they will encounter with students. The solution-oriented approach takes a proactive stance recommending searching out what the client is doing right and use that information to help eliminate the problem (O'Hanlon, 1999). Some of O'Hanlon's ideas include changing the frequency of problem pattern, the time,

location, and intensity of the problem pattern, and then add or take away something from the sequence to make it different, thereby exposing the problem.

Early identification of students at-risk is critical for successful intervention programs. Research findings said it becomes evident, even as early as kindergarten, which students are candidates for dropping out of school (Kronick, 1997). And the earlier detected, the better the chances of preventing more dysfunctional behaviors from later developing. Drug abuse, teen pregnancies, and students dropping out of school would be greatly lessened if students were identified early and provided the appropriate intervention (Kronick (1997). Assessments tools found in this literary review varied depending on the age of the student. For instance, the Devereaux Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale is a K-6 assessment inventory used to help detect at-risk students at the elementary level. At the middle-school level, reading, mathematical abilities and/or monitoring the number of absence are good indicators that help identify potential dropouts.

The more evidence gathered, the better the chances are in identifying the reasons leading a student to drop out of school. Research revealed the best ways of gathering information is through checklists, student records, surveys, exit interviews, data analysis and its utilization, which finally lead to the appropriate intervention (Wells, 1990).

There is a myriad of intervention plans for students who are at-risk of failing and becoming potential candidates for dropping out of school. It becomes obvious in this literary review that effective intervention programs are not the work of just one person, but rather the work of a number of individuals and institutions. This oftentimes includes

the cooperative work of student, parents, teachers, school administrators, peer groups, outside agencies, and community to name a few.

Intervention plans will not fair as well without one key element; the quality of human relationship and/or connectedness (Brendo, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990). Fostering a safe and nurturing environment is where children are likely to thrive both emotionally as well as educationally. Research for this literary review supported this theory with evidence from school districts who said it was the up-close and personal attention, addressing individual student needs, flexibility, demonstrating equality among ethnic and racial groups, getting parents involved, knowing that each person is their own person and making sure expectations on the individual student is harmonious with the needs of that student (Goplerund, 1991 cited in Kronick, 1997). Other programs are designed to help students develop social skills by getting the students more involved in school functions. An Alabama school district connected at-risk high school students with grade school aged children and both benefited from the experience because of the one-on-one attention and feelings of importance that arose from the alliance. Another school district program had full support of their School Board and was committed to making their drop-out prevention program a success. This meant taking on additional staff, assistance for ESL students, and setting up a volunteer program to assist students as needed.

Research done on work with at-risk youth and their success in school often pointed to teachers and the vital role they play in the lives of their students. This literary review found that teachers can enhance the retention of at-risk youth by getting to know their students and earning their trust through consistent, positive intervention. Teachers

can also help in this process by becoming a positive role model, teaching interesting and relevant information, monitoring academic programs, keeping a line of communication open with students, encouraging participation in extracurricular activities, acting immediately when patterns of failure appear, and having a relationship with parents or guardians of that child (Sanders and Sanders (1998). Teachers can also be effective in the likes of at-risk students by providing structure and predictability in the classroom which is what so many at-risk youth lack in their life (Conrath, 1988).

The literature review also tapped into four other creative strategies that helped prevent students from dropping out of school. The strategies included the work of community-based organizations and their collaborative efforts within the community to assist in their mission to keep students in school. Case management intervention involved matching a student's needs with appropriate community services. School-within-a-school is a program designed to provide instruction in basic skills, career exploration, and counseling services. And finally, implementing a negative sanction policy is a strategy that involves invoking sanctions on students dropping out of school (Diggs, 1996; Lunenburg & Irby, 1999; McWhirter, 1997; Sprick, Sprick, & Garrison, 1998).

Intervention programs are a blend of many different kinds of strategies all with the same mission in mind – to help prevent students from dropping out of school. Simple techniques such as setting up a buddy system, monthly orientation activities, getting parents and guardians involved, providing leaves of absences to students experiencing difficult times, and providing nutrition and health services for at-risk students and families in need are other types of intervention methods found in this



literary review. Research also documents that alternative schools continue to grow because they work. The philosophy behind alternative schools is based on offering the close-knit environment and one-on-one attention with flexibility in its curriculum, and autonomy (Barr & Parrett, 1997) and (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandex, 1989). Alternative schools provide an environment where students can address their studies without the temptations and everyday distractions that prevented them from doing well in the traditional school setting. Alternative schools operate on the assumption that all youth need a place to belong, which is why so many alternative programs are designed to build a sense of community and personal confidence in their students by offering a variety of experiences to them.

Throughout this literary review, there seems to be a consensus among the authors that early identification and intervention, school reform, and a team approach is what matters most in promoting school success in students.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Summary and Recommendations

The purpose of this literary review was to examine youth labeled at-risk, its impact on society and its members, and school-wide intervention programs designed to reach students at-risk and promote their school success.

The literary review involved reviewing literature on at-risk youth. This researcher found that there has been a great deal of research done on this subject. Information for this study was obtained from a variety of sources.

The findings of this literary review impress that early identification and intervention, school reform, and a team approach is what promotes school success in students. The message is unwavering in that it also takes devoted, compassionate, and strong individuals who have a commitment to helping youth at-risk that inspires students to work hard at becoming successful in school. Bonding is critical in maintaining commitment from students in school. It is also important to create strong alliances with community organizations and local businesses for their support. The message gathered from this literary review is that you can't give up on students.

Change or eliminate all labeling at school. Avoid labels such as slow, unmotivated, disabled, or uncooperative. Personality or ability labels can create self-fulfilling prophecies and is disrespectful to some degree. One author wrote that an organized at-risk program can exacerbate the problem simply because of the at-risk label attached to the child. It is important to make sure the climate in school is such that all students are seen as needing an engaging and motivating curriculum. At-risk means understanding not all children are alike and their needs vary with each individual. Just

as with any child, youth at-risk have talents and gifts, many buried so deep they often go unnoticed in schools. Research has found that students at-risk oftentimes have unique learning styles and it is the school's responsibility to help accommodate all children with various learning styles, which is why it is in the child's and school's best interest if the school utilizes flexible teaching methods always maintaining a program that is academically challenging for all students. It is also important to remember that labels are harmful because the label itself does not adequately represent the whole person. Negative labels can lead a child from becoming discouraged to becoming defeated until eventually the time comes when the child drops out of school.

The challenges for preventing children from dropping out of school are difficult to face because it takes time, energy, and patience to help keep at-risk youth in school. But the costs become even greater over time if ignored pretending the problem doesn't exist. Statistics are showing that in the U.S. alone, an enormous amount of money is lost in earning, taxes, social services, welfare program, prison and juvenile court systems. Pay now or pay later. Acknowledging that there is a problem is the first step in finding a solution to the problem.

A united front between student, family, school, and community pulling together has the potential for making a difference in the lives of at-risk youth. Intervention programs also help change lives. Its strategies can include a variety of methods, such as being present with that child, flexibility in curriculum, engaging the students in passionate things so learning becomes meaningful for them, providing one-on-one instruction, offering formal programs utilizing mentors or group counseling sessions, and providing a classroom climate where help is always available. Awareness,

prevention, and treatment programs are also ways to help students take a proactive stance in their fight against failing in school and in life. These types of programs help lead students toward a more productive and healthy lifestyle.

As one researcher wrote, “if at first you don’t succeed, try something different” (Murphy & Duncan, 1997). Individuals working with at-risk youth should be mindful of things that the child is already doing right and work with that information to eliminate other potential problems from presenting themselves.

It is evident from this literary review that some of the focus in schools has been on the superficial aspects of the problem or trying to fix the child who is at-risk rather than focusing on the underlying cause of the problem, which may mean changing the environment. One author suggested having a base knowledge of the youth’s school experiences and the characteristics of the school they attend, because these things may influence the course of his or her school career (Roderick, 1993). Language plays a large part in how we interact in our environment and in our interpersonal relationships with others. Responding to the needs of a child requires working to understand that child. This may require changing one’s perception of the meaning of “at-risk.”

The time has come to remove the blinders and not look at at-risk youth through narrow lenses. It is this negative view toward at-risk youth that contributes and preserves at-risk behaviors. Instead, look to empower at-risk youth by helping them to believe in themselves by believing in them. Feed into this process by encouraging motivation through positive role modeling teaching students that learning is fun, exciting, and personally rewarding. Recognize students for their strengths and talents linking their efforts to their success.

Give students the opportunity to take control of their learning, provide them with challenges, and always hold them to high expectations. Teach at-risk students about failure and that temporary failure and set-backs are all part of the learning process. Continually monitor student progress and change strategies if, after a reasonable amount of time, students are not succeeding. Be open to new and creative approaches to teaching all students incorporating acceptance and compassion into the curriculum. Always be prepared and, most importantly, never, never give up on them.

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